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A recording of Dr EH Back, Medical Officer with Operation Tabarin between 1943 and 1946, in conversation with Miss Joanna Rae, Assistant Archivist of the British Antarctic Survey.

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N.B. This transcript is an edited version of the full transcript of this recording, and is suitable for quick reference purposes. While this version avoids many repetitions and stumbles in the original recording, it is recommended that, should the fuller transcript not make clear the sense of the spoken word, the recording must be the final arbiter.

amc 8. 9. 2003

[Grounded line burst at start of original recording]

Joanna Rae: Could you give me an outline of your career before joining Operation Tabarin?

Eric Back: I went to school at Marlborough and came up to Cambridge in 1938 with a major scholarship to Claire College, Cambridge. I read medicine and qualified in 1943. After six months working in a hospital I joined the RNVR in September of 1943; I had undertaken the normal introductory courses for newly joined medical officers and then I heard about Operation Tabarin.

Joanna Rae: How did you come to hear about it?

Eric Back: It happened indirectly, because in August of 1943, I was best man at a wedding in Birmingham, at which Dr Marr was present. Dr Marr was James Marr's brother and he was indirectly responsible for my being asked to join the expedition. I was asked by the Navy to meet Lieutenant Marr at the Colonial Office and he outlined the expedition and it was arranged with the Admiralty that I should join.

Joanna Rae: What was your immediate reaction when he suggested it?

Eric Back: Well, it was every schoolboy's dream to have gone to the Antarctic but I'd read all of the Antarctic books in the library at school and I was always keen, though never thought I'd have a chance of going.

Joanna Rae: Were you told anything of the purpose of the expedition?

Eric Back: No but, in wartime, you didn't ask...

Joanna Rae: Ah...

Eric Back: – the purposes of military exercises. As far as I was concerned, this was a job they wanted a Naval Doctor to do, and it sounded the sort of job I would like to do; so, possibly rejecting the standard Service routine of never volunteering for anything – I volunteered.

Joanna Rae: And did you see it, primarily, in your own view, as a military or a scientific exercise?

Eric Back: Well, basically that in 1943, everything was of military importance, and one could see that, with the Mediterranean at that time only just opened, there was a lot of traffic going round the Horn, and going round the Cape, and that to have a base south of the Antarctic, [south] of the main fronts and the depressions would obviously be of use.

I had a certain amount of meteorological experience before: when I was at school, I ran the meteorological station – which has been at Marlborough College since the 1860's. If you look at the recent annual report of the Monthly Weather Report, issued just the other day, you will notice that Marlborough is one of those stations that has been recording ever since the Monthly Weather Report was first started in 1884. My grandfather was a Naval Doctor, who went to sea in sail: he kept regular meteorological observations during his time and I inherited from him a thermometer, which I still have, and I have kept records of the weather since I was nine.

Joanna Rae: So, when you went South, was it on the understanding that you would be doing meteorological work as well?

Eric Back: Yes, I think it was a surprise to the members organising the expedition that I knew anything about Met. at all but, the Met. Officer was Gordon Howkins, who'd previously been in [the] Falklands, and he provided me with some books and he provided some equipment, and so off we went.

Joanna Rae: Time must have been very short – in organising everything before the expedition sailed, Could you tell me about your involvement in preparations?

Eric Back: Yes, and the Met. Apparatus was all organised by the Admiralty. As far as medical stores were concerned, I was told, "You can order anything you like but you aren't allowed to talk to anybody about it." I had a very brief visit with Surgeon Commander Bingham who gave me two bits of advice – one was true and one was not – he said, "Deception is just like England" which is not true and that "Resinal is excellent treatment for frostbite," which it is.

But otherwise, I was left entirely on my own but I ordered far too much equipment and, quite likely, some of it is still being used by the Argentines in Hope Bay.

Joanna Rae: Had you had any experience on particular polar problems at all, of a medical nature?

Eric Back: No: one had no knowledge, I'd read all the classical Antarctic books; I'd read Scott and Shackleton and the medical aspects were not very detailed: the one thing I did know about was scurvy and so, we took our fifty milligrams of ascorbic acid every day and, otherwise, it was very much a question of thinking what you wanted. We were, of course, before Penicillin had been invented: we had Sulphonamide, and a standard Ship's equipment, a very good library, provided by the Navy for junior Medical Officers, and so I ordered that, but somebody left it on the jetty in Montevideo, so the whole time I was down South, the only medical book I had was "Aids to Tropical Diseases." [Laughter] But I don't think my colleagues actually knew that, and they all thought I was quite a good doctor. [Laughter.]

Joanna Rae: The ship that you were originally intending to sail in was the HMS *Bransfield*; could you tell me a little bit about the ship and it's problems?

Eric Back: Yes, the *Bransfield*; Marr found this up in Iceland – she was a sealer and she'd been tootling around in the Arctic for many years; was [a] suitable wooden ship, and she was brought down and commissioned. I think the tremendous amount of hard work that Marr did, to get this expedition going – that he got the whole thing organised in the matter of three months from start to finish, and he got a rather motley collection, probably under modern standards, of crew, that when we see the advertisements of how people are now chosen to go to the Antarctic, I don't think any of us would have qualified at all; but he got all this organised and he got over a tremendous lots of difficulties and he got Operation Tabarin landed in the Antarctic, when he was supposed to.

And, I don't think any credit could be too high for his organising ability – to get this out. He was not helped, I think, very much by various Civil Servants in the Colonial Office.

Joanna Rae: Was anyone detailed to assist him, from the Colonial Office or something?

Eric Back: Oh yes! He was immortalised, actually, in the 'ABC' in the "Hope Bay Howler" – "A" is for Ashton, who built a fine house,
and also for someone with the brains of a louse."

And we'll say no more about this gentleman – I believe he got an OBE for our troubles... [Laughter.]

Joanna Rae: So you, when did you meet the rest of the expedition? Was it when you...

Eric Back: By the time the Navy had sorted me out from doing gas training and other forms of training, it was the 25th of October when I joined in 2, Park Street, Mayfair; which is just behind the RNVR Club. The ship actually sailed on the 9th of November, so they really did get a tremendous move on. I stayed with some friends in North London and I used to trundle down to the *Bransfield* on the old steam railway, and somehow or other, all the stores got ordered and all got on board. Exactly who one met [and] when, I can't very much remember but we met up one on one, and

eventually we all piled onto the ship in London docks, and off we went, in the November fog.

Joanna Rae: When I spoke to Mr Davies, he said there was a send-off party...

Eric Back: Oh yes, the send-off party was held at the Goring Hotel and we were not allowed to invite sweethearts, wives, mothers, because it was all too secret for that but, we were sent off by the Colonial Office and various people there; and as we walked out we were asked to cough up three quid for the privilege [Laughter] and I might say we eventually got that back again.

Joanna Rae: Oh that...

Eric Back: Did Davies tell you that one?

Joanna Rae: No, he didn't tell me you got the money back... [Crosstalk]

Eric Back: Oh he didn't? Perhaps he didn't! [Laughter] But yes, during that time, because of the wartime secrecy I think people don't realise, that in wartime, you didn't ask any questions about anything, and so, no-one knew you were going to the Antarctic or, if you were issued with warm clothing it probably meant you were going to the tropics.

Joanna Rae: So you boarded the *Bransfield* and... [Crosstalk]

Eric Back: We boarded the *Bransfield* and the first day, we chugged down and got as far as Tilbury, and then we all went ashore, because Tom Berry lived in Gravesend, then the next day we got down to Southend; and a convoy was duly assembled and I think Marchesi, being the sort of senior Officer thought he'd be in charge of the escort, but they didn't realise quite how slow it was so, eventually, we pummelled off and we went through the Straits of Dover in the middle of the night – underneath the German guns and Cape Gris Nez and, when morning broke there was no sign of any convoy because the *Bransfield* couldn't go that fast; Everybody seems to have said it was leaking – I didn't know if it was leaking then, at any rate the engines weren't working very well so we went into Portsmouth and so, within about four days of having said goodbye to our loved ones for the next two years – there we were, back home again! [Laughter.]

Joanna Rae: Oh dear – and so from there you went on... [Crosstalk]

Eric Back: Well, we started off another convoy after about four days and the next day we went from Portsmouth as far as Portland and by this time it was Thanksgiving Day so, I spent a very happy evening in the Gloucester Hotel with various Americans enjoying Thanksgiving; after that we made Dartmouth and then we went from Dartmouth to Falmouth which was supposed to be our last port of call before we went to Freetown. Going down Channel we ran into a Force Nine gale and the ship started to leak and the Engineer told the Captain that the pumps wouldn't work; we had to stop the ship so that the pumps could pump and it all looked rather unhappy on the whole, and nobody quite knew where we were, there was a short clearance in the weather and there was a lump of Cornwall visible and I said, 'that is

the Dodman' [Point] 'cause I'd been down there in my father's ship, HMS Westcott¹ some ten years previously.

Eventually, we got into Falmouth, sailing straight across the minefield – to cries of, “What ship?” – and nobody had ever heard of HMS *Bransfield*. I presume because we were wooden we didn't set the minefield off, and going down Channel, Marr still thought we were going to get... to [the] Falklands in the *Bransfield* – I don't know if anyone else did: he doled out all the polar clothing in the Channel but, by the time we got to Falmouth it was quite obvious we weren't going to get much further and so, we sort of sat there, while further contemplating ways how we were going to get any further...

Joanna Rae: And was that Marr's responsibility to try and find an alternative?

Eric Back: Yes, I suppose he was – with remarkable swiftness they discovered that there was the *Highland Monarch*, a South American fruit ship – a meat ship, that she was about to sail to the Falklands, with a relief garrison. And on the way, she was calling at Gibraltar with large numbers of Gibraltarian exiles, who were taken out from Gibraltar in 1940, when it was thought there was going to be a siege, and the men were returning home.

But, on the subject of the Falklands, it's interesting: at the time when the Falkland War was on and afterwards, and there has now been a garrison at the Falklands – that from 1940, until 1944; there was a garrison of 2000 men in the Falklands and they were being taken out by the *Highland Monarch* and the *Highland Monarch* was taking 200- troops under the command of Colonel Mombert to relieve the Falkland garrison.

Joanna Rae: And I heard, in various accounts that you spent twenty-four hours on the train [Crosstalk] trans-shipping?

Eric Back: Yes. There was a special train organised. to transport us, with all our stores; I say thirteen trucks and one passenger coach, that was to take us from Falmouth to Bristol Avonmouth, where the *Highland Monarch* was about to sail. And we started off early in the morning and they [said] “Ah – we'll send you through just ahead of the ‘Cornish Riviera.’” But we didn't get far before the railway seemed to have forgotten about that, so we were pushed into a siding - we trundled slowly across the countryside of the West Country – we stopped at one occasion at Newton Abbot and all charged out at the signal box [to see] if they'd make us a cup of tea, and we got to Bristol about two o'clock in the morning whereupon somebody appeared and says, “Tickets, please.” [Laughter.]

So this time, again, we discover the ship wasn't going to sail for two days – and so we all beetled off home again; which surprised a lot of people, because nobody's supposed to leave ships when they're about to sail. So, we came back two days later and this time, we actually did get off.

¹ 'W' Class Long Range Escort Destroyer D47.

Joanna Rae: Now, so you eventually got down to the Antarctic. Could you tell me what your duties were there, Oh – at Base ‘A’, to start with?

Eric Back: Well at Base A I was the Doctor and the Meteorologist and the first thing that we set-to to do, was to get the Met. Station going; that was my particular job, and we did, in fact, get the Met. Observations started on the 1st of March, which was not bad as we only landed in February.² Of course, everybody were second-class ‘wood butchers’ working under the Command of Ashton, who was a Master Craftsman and got part of this motley crew of people, armed with hammers and nails to put the house together.

We were quite well off to start with, because we went down to the Antarctic, not only in the *William Scoresby* which was built for ice and had been a whalecatcher before but there was the *Fitzroy*, which was a sort of passenger cargo ship which trundled along between Falklands, Montevideo, Punta Arenas and South Georgia, so that she was not built for ice but she was certainly built for bad weather, and so we lived in great comfort until the *Fitzroy* left, at three o’clock in the morning, and we didn’t even have a floor laid in the hut at that time, so we had to turn-to and lay the floor before we had anywhere to sleep on.

The weather was about freezing; not very pleasant but not all that cold, and the chief job for the first month or so was in getting ourselves established, and fit to live.

Joanna Rae: Did you actually sleep in the hut by the time?

Eric Back: We slept in the hut the first night: in the hut as we didn’t have any tents – we were only on a very small island in Port Lockroy and in the summertime that was cut off from the mainland, as in the winter you could walk across on the ice... but, in summer, we were cut off and we had a vast amount of hard labour in humping all the stores, getting things going; stoves and things all had to be unpacked and... everybody sort of ‘mucked in’ doing all the jobs.

Joanna Rae: And did Ashton work to a plan? Was is a sort of pre-fabricated... [Crosstalk]

Eric Back: Yes, it was prefabricated; it came from Boulton & Paul in Norwich, it was carefully prefabricated, with mortise and tenon joints, but I think the exact plan was suitable for putting it up in the English summer but not in Antarctic blizzards. So, although they were all marked, Ashton put them all in the right place, but he did them all with six-inch nails and it was a very nice hut; in addition, we got a certain amount of timber from Deception which was used to build an extension on the hut. The Port Lockroy hut was an extremely nice one; very comfortable – it took about two months to get it to that stage.³

Joanna Rae: And, can you tell me er, were there any problems with the meteorological equipment? [Crosstalk]

² 11 February 1944.

³ The Boulton and Paul hut represented only about 40% of the total space occupied during the winter of 1944. Apart from scavenged materials from Deception Island, timber abandoned in Alice Creek by whalers prior to 1931, plus flooring timber originally intended for use in the two Nissen huts (delivered in February 1944) were used for the extensions. Much of Ashton’s *ad hoc* bunkhouse and partitions were later demolished and rebuilt on the Argentine Islands as Wordie House in 1947. (*amc*)

Eric Back: Well, the only problem was that the clocks would permanently stop – I don't think anybody had told them that they were supposed to be under polar conditions, so we had a lot of trouble getting the clocks to go; eventually we took them all to bits and treated them with graphite and we got them going quite reasonably well.⁴ But, the instruments were very good, and we had an anemometer and Ashton brought a pole from Deception, thirty feet high, and he rigged this up behind the hut at Port Lockroy and it worked very well for us, when I was there. [Interruption]

As soon as we were up, the observations were being sent off to Stanley, so that when we got our numbers on the International Register, they were being sent out to the world, from about a month after starting.⁵

Joanna Rae: That was a good record – and you were making regular readings... [Crosstalk]

Eric Back: Yes, I used to take eight, eleven, two, four, seven, ten; that was my six observations a day, and I did nearly all of them myself; but in fact in Port Lockroy I did them all, and in Hope Bay David James used to do them sometimes. But one of the advantages of doing the Met., was that we were exempted the job of doing Bogie man, as you had to get up early every day to read the weather, you did not have to light the stove as well. While other people who had to do that in turn...

Joanna Rae: So you didn't often have a lay-in?

Eric Back: No.

Joanna Rae: Did you mind that?

Eric Back: No, one got used to it, [by]doing the Met. you could avoid a certain number of the more objectionable chores...

Joanna Rae: So, it had its advantages...

Eric Back: For example, if there was a 'smoker' because the snow would blow on top of the roof, and when the stove was lit and all the smoke came out, it was somebody else always had to go up and clear the top. [Laughter]

Joanna Rae: Oh dear. Could you tell me something about living conditions in the hut?

Eric Back: Well, once we got established in Lockroy, we were really extremely comfortable: we had two-berth cabins with beds we found from Deception, so we had bunk beds, one on top of the other; and each pair had arranged various little bits and wardrobes and suchlike which we'd made out of bits of packing-case; the- Lockroy house was nice, warm and comfortable – we had an Esse stove which burned continually and for relaxation we had books sent out from the medical libraries, and

⁴ Thermo- and barograph clocks.

⁵ Until Operation Tabarin's cover was blown, these had to be broadcast encrypted. (ame)

all sorts of things came out and somebody, with a stroke of genius, sent out a complete collection of all the ‘William’ books.

And, when these first arrived they [said] “who do they think we are, sending all this sort of kid’s rubbish out?” And that was that, and then, you’d find, on a quiet evening, in a corner, you’d suddenly hear “Ooh, Horr, Horr, Horr, Horr, Haar!” and – one after another, somebody was reading a ‘William’ book – and every single ‘William’ book was read by everybody with much enjoyment.

Joanna Rae: That was good.

Eric Back: But – who thought of sending rough sailors William books, I don’t know – but they were great fun...

Joanna Rae: And you had magazines as well?

Eric Back: Well, we had magazines a year old: I had all my medical magazines and I had a fair number before I went south and in Christmas ’44, when the mail came out, there was a year’s supply, and so I carefully annotated each one with the date, and opened one a week; so that I kept myself up-to-date hence, to some extent, with what was going on at home.

We had a gramophone and, certainly the second year, David James had a very nice selection of records, which he brought out.

Joanna Rae: It was up to you as individuals to do that kind of thing, was it?

Eric Back: Yes, well, again, there was a selection of records provided by the Naval Comforts – they were very good...

Joanna Rae: What, what did you do about keeping the place clean, and things like that, ’cause there couldn’t- there weren’t Hoovers, obviously in those days...

Eric Back: No, but again, each day there was the Bogie man and the Bogie man, was responsible for keeping the stoves going and sort of the general tidying up – we did, in fact, have a handyman each year, who was expected to help the cook and just generally tidy things up. But, we did have a system whereby we definitely had a cook, who did the cooking, and there was Tom Berry who was our cook both years: he’d been a purser in the *Discovery*, and he was trained in the Merchant Service – he was a Master Baker. Within forty-eight hours of our first setting foot on Hope Bay, he had bread baked ashore. And we had...

Joanna Rae: That must have been remarkable...

Eric Back: Yes...

Joanna Rae: ‘Cause you only had a- it was a tin galley...⁶

⁶ Pre-fabricated by Ashton at Base A, to overcome those problems faced when first setting up base at Port Lockroy, it was shipped from Lockroy to Hope Bay. Following the tragic fire at Hope Bay in 1948, it was the only building left standing.

Eric Back: In a tin galley; there's a marvellous picture of him sitting on a saw, looking at the stove, where we are all eating our first bread that he baked.

We had very good food; a bit monotonous, and the tinned milk all froze and it was pretty disgusting. But on the whole, the food was excellent. And we had a certain amount of fresh food came down from Port Stanley; we went down with forty sheep and eight oxen in the rigging but, unfortunately, the temperature in Lockroy was such that most of that was gone off in about a month.

Joanna Rae: Well, could you tell me some of the food you had – some of the meals, if you can remember them?

Eric Back: Well, we had, bully beef, and stew and tinned vegetables of various sorts – lots of tinned fruit, vast amounts chocolate – that was very nice, it was interesting that when we were working hard at Hope Bay – Hope Bay's a lot colder than Lockroy and we were working against the winter to get the house finished and each man was eating half a pound of chocolate a day; I worked out were having – our dietary was about five to six thousand calories so one eats a tremendous lot, and the food was very much as provided for HM Ships and very little fresh food, except when you got penguin eggs in season then, when a ship came down there was some fresh vegetables from Stanley which was very much appreciated and otherwise – out of a tin.

Joanna Rae: And, did you eat seal meat?

Eric Back: Yes, we had seal meat – it is said to be an acquired taste, it entirely depends on how hungry you are; but if you are really hungry like people out sledging are, seal meat tastes nice. But seal liver is quite reasonable. Seal steak, I never did really thoroughly appreciate but, it was a change from bully beef, and Tom Berry could, in fact produce, as it were, for our Midwinter meal – fried fillets of seal Rossini; I think they would have gone down at the Ritz but they weren't bad, but I was never frighfully enthusiastic about seal – I'd rather have bully beef. [Laughter]

Joanna Rae: Now what were the sledging rations like?

Eric Back: I think I was on one short sledge trip from Hope Bay in the January of 1946; they were adequate, nutritionally – people seemed to survive on them. I think they were very similar to the sort of stuff that Scott took, with pemmican they'd extra vitamins, which they all took. I drew up a sledging ration: I've got it, actually, but I think I haven't brought it with me today.

Joanna Rae: Yes, I think I've got a copy...

Eric Back: Yes, you've got a copy of that, don't you?

Joanna Rae: If we move onto the next question... could we talk a little bit about Hope Bay, the setting up the base?

Eric Back: Well, whereas Lockroy was very much made up at the spur of the moment, we started off with a rush when Marr was assigned to do the job and we

were still living from hand-to-mouth when we got there, but the setting up of Hope Bay was started during the winter of 1944, but Marr went up to Stanley in December '44 to meet the ship coming out from England and the new members, so that things were put into the ship so the things that were supposed to come out first went in last, and we did a lot of planning in Lockroy about the loading of the stores and how we were going to do things.

As a result of that we got off to a very good start in Hope Bay: it was decided in advance what stores were going to go into about five different piles, and these were all marked, and everything as it landed, each scow-load that arrived ashore was put onto the appropriate pile. The first job that we did, was put up this 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' it was a prefabricated shack, made out of corrugated iron and bits of Deception timber which had been more or less put together at Lockroy. [It] was put straight ashore from the *Eagle* and within forty-eight hours Tom Berry had bread baked inside.

And this had a roof on it⁷ and various people, who like the open-air life like 'Taff' Davies, had fairly soon moved out and camped in it. When the *Eagle* finally left us we'd spent a few days in this tin shack, until the house was fit to go in to. But the timing worked very well, but a top priority was made, that the Nordenskjöld's hut should be thoroughly investigated before anybody had been sort of charging around and making messes, so this was properly surveyed – mostly by Taylor, before anybody got near it.

Joanna Rae: It must have been very interesting to find that as a relic...

Eric Back: Oh yes, this was fascinating, to think that these men had survived [being brought] there forty years previously. I don't think that it [was] appreciated that when they set down for the winter, at Hope Bay, nobody on earth knew where they were. And of course their ship that was going to pick them up, had not come back, so obviously it had sunk somewhere; Nordenskjöld's party was at Snow Hill Island, which was a couple of hundred miles away, and they couldn't get there as they were cut off by the water when they tried to walk – and nobody knew they were at Hope Bay, 'cause the people who'd landed them there presumably were lost.

And that the courage which they set-to and killed off the penguins to eat during the winter; and kept their sledging rations so that they could walk in the spring to get down to Snow Hill; a very, very, fine piece of work.

Joanna Rae: Yes, you wonder how people can endure such conditions [Crosstalk] during the whole winter [*sotto voce*] So the *Eagle* had a little bit of trouble, before, [Crosstalk] she had to leave a early, in fact.

Eric Back: Yes, the *Eagle* had one or two narrow squeaks, there was one occasion, in which a large berg broke off the Hope Bay glacier in the middle of a gale and came bearing down upon the *Eagle* and missed it literally by a whisker and didn't sink it; there was another occasion when there was a loud Bang! some gunpowder was lying around and so it had gone off; then finally she came back in March with some

⁷ Heartfelt comment. When the ships first left Port Lockroy a year earlier, the men slept in their clothes on the floor of the un-roofed hut. (amc)

further load of equipment, a whole lot of stores she hadn't managed to land before – there was a very severe Storm 10 gale, and she dragged her anchor, went out to sea, hit two icebergs, stove her bow in and, at one stage, it was thought she was going to have to be beached, which would have certainly meant loss of a ship and probably most of the men.

But by a superb act of seamanship, Captain Sheppard got her back to Port Stanley; but it did mean that a lot of the equipment we ought to have had ashore we actually didn't have in Hope Bay, so we were never as comfortable in Hope Bay as we had been in Lockroy. We were not short of anything – there was plenty of food, but it was much more monotonous than we had before...

Joanna Rae: Yes, so you had to make do... I see [*sotto voce*] I'd like to ask you a little bit about some of the more humorous aspects of life down South – and particularly the base magazines...

Eric Back: Yes, the base magazines. There was a thought that we ought – that everybody knows about Scott's South Polar Times, and we felt that we ought to do something and in the first year we had The Port Lockroy Prattler, which never got properly going, 'cause we didn't have anybody who had any journalistic art at all.

But the second year, David James was the leading light inspiring the Hope Bay Howler. Lamb was a masterly artist, who drew the back-plates, which are very good examples of Antarctic life, and various people were conscripted into writing articles for it. Some of the advertisements are really quite amusing – this was a house advertised in Deception [with] all mod con, only eight thousand miles for London [Laughter.]

We had a lot of fun out of this – David James started off, in fine style, and the first edition came out for Midwinter's Day in June '45. I'm not quite sure what happened after that, but I was then volunteered to be editor thereafter and I couldn't type, so I was taught to type, and we produced from June till December '45 – and we had articles from our people in Deception, and the people in Lockroy. And there were a number of items "How I came to the Antarctic" and I think you've got copies in the [Crosstalk] in the Archives.

But, [as I] say – we had a lot of fun, actually, and although we don't see each other very often, you pick up somebody you haven't seen for twenty years and you just do that, and for some incredible reason, they still think I'm quite a good Doctor. [Laughter]

Joanna Rae: Perhaps we could talk in fact, about any of the medical cases – like what kind of illnesses and injuries were you dealing with?

Eric Back: Well, fortunately, of course, the Antarctic is well known to be free from infections, so, once you've got rid of the infections you've taken down with you, you don't get coughs and colds very much and the only serious one I'll come to at the end: there were a certain number of minor injuries, Tom Berry went out and broke a bone in his foot one evening – and in no way could he be allowed to have any time off

so his leg was duly plastered and he was rigged up with a walking iron and stuck in the galley.⁸

Otherwise, there was a certain amount of back strains [and] minor injuries; there was one epic occasion when Johnny Blyth was brought back on a sledge, snow-blind. after being out from Hope Bay⁹ for about three or four days, in November. “I never took me goggles off, Doc,” he said. Unfortunately there’s a lovely picture, in the archive, showing Johnny Blyth, up on the mountain above the Peltier Channel, looking out to sea and wearing no goggles. [Laughter, Crosstalk]

Joanna Rae: So, the evidence is there!

Eric Back: The evidence is there... there was a certain amount of dental problems that we had, various peoples’ fillings came out and I dabbled around with a mixture of clove oil and zinc oxide which seemed to patch most of them up – we got a dentist out in 1944 from the Falklands – a chap called Tomlinson from the Army Dental Corps, who is still in practice in Reading, or just retired, and he fixed everybody up and again, saw people at the end. I didn’t have to pull anybody’s teeth out, just as well...

Joanna Rae: Did you any kind of anaesthetic? [Crosstalk] to get dental work?

Eric Back: We had local anaesthetic; in fact, the only operation I had to do was to operate on a septic finger, and the owner of the septic finger still talks to me, so probably this operation was successful.¹⁰

One had awful visions, actually that, with a septic finger, something would go wrong; you’d first have to amputate his finger, and then half his arm and the rest of his arm; [one] wasn’t quite certain how you were going to end up. [Laughter] But, these were just my private worries; of course the other people didn’t hear much about it.

But one bad thing was a major disgrace on the people in the Falklands. They decided they wanted an extra hand to go down to Deception and they sent down a man who was known to be unfit; he was over 50 and that nobody asked me or the doctors of the Falklands about checking this man before he was sent down and he proceeded to be ill and he died shortly after returning to Port Stanley. He was sent up to Montevideo for examination – he had a cancer in his stomach. He became unconscious in about June 1945 and the record of (I think it was with Reece at Deception)¹¹ of cross-examination by Radio of ‘do this, try that; test his toes, which way...’ and finally we made a diagnosis and he duly recovered from his stroke which he’d had, but he was dying of his cancer before he got back to Stanley – he was quite inoperable. But there was no way in which he should have been sent South; he was not fit to go.

⁸ Berry broke his leg ‘doing an impromptu fan-dance’ at the end of a party on 20 March 1944.

⁹ Slip of the tongue. As indicated in the text, this did occur at Port Lockroy. Blyth became very concerned, anticipating Marr’s reaction to this event. Marr’s only reaction was to say to him, “We all make mistakes – just don’t do it again.” (amc)

¹⁰ 2 March 1944 – JEB Farrington

¹¹ Sub- Lieutenant AW Reece, RNVR. Base Leader and Meteorologist at Deception Island 1945; Meteorologist at Hope Bay 1946.

The rest of our people were in good nick, and there was no serious illness. But we did, of course, have one man, who was appointed originally as a gentleman called Mr Buck; who was a geologist, who had a lot of experience exploring in South America, prospecting for minerals; he was a fully trained geologist and he started off with us in HMS *Bransfield* but having found the discomforts of the *Bransfield* and reckoning quite correct[ly] it was going to be a jolly site worse by the time he got South, he decided he wasn't fit. He was over fifty, not a very well man and he was quite sensible to have pulled out. Of course it did mean that whereas we were supposed originally to have two geologists on the expedition, we did in fact have only Mr. Flett from Glasgow [Crosstalk] – one geologist.

Joanna Rae: I believe you have a theory about one of the purposes of the expedition?

Eric Back: Well, [I've] wondered why did we go down? My own view (of course the Antarctic weather was important) but this was the time of the atom bomb; and although we knew nothing about it when we went South, by the time we came back again I reckon it was not unlikely that one of the things we might be looking for was uranium. But all round the Antarctic Peninsula there were lots of minerals; some of the mountains are green with copper, and obviously it is not economically practical to get copper out; but if there were uranium in the Antarctic mountains then no doubt it might have been practical. This is purely a speculation, which I have speculated for forty years.

Joanna Rae: What do you remember with particular pleasure, when you think back to those days?

Eric Back: A number of things: one of them of course is the companionship that one gets [*sotto voce*] with people who you live very close together with – the fact that you know perfectly well that, whatever happens, that you're going to have to live with these nine or twelve men for the next nine months, it encourages you to get on with them, and there were no major squabbles or upsets.

The other thing, I did go in, [meaning a second position] trips but still, one at times was walking where no man ever walked previously; that I thought was rather plum. As I recall at times in my letters home that, on the 1st of January 1945, in our latitude 65 South at Port Lockroy, we were the only people on God's earth who saw the New Year in, in daylight. These made one think...

The other thing is that the Antarctic is quite incredibly beautiful – the skies and the mountains, and the mock suns – this is something that one can never forget.

Joanna Rae: Do you find you can actually remember them? This- [*Record gain then reduced to zero.*] so, that was the scenery of the place. Certainly Davies said that they felt a great affinity for the wildlife that managed to survive there.

Eric Back: Oh yes, the interesting thing of course was that in the wintertime there was no wildlife. The penguins all go north, the gulls all go north; the only people who stayed behind are the sheathbills or 'Paddies' and I'm not quite sure what

happens to them if there isn't anybody there, they live on our excrement, a nice bit of stool is just the job for a Paddy.

Certainly, the sight of the penguins coming in the springtime is quite incredible; you see them coming in at Hope Bay; one moment there's nobody there, then they all start coming and they leap six feet up in the air up onto the ice front, or walk across – there's a picture that the sledge party found, of the penguins marching across the ice – over a hundred miles away from the nearest open water, still heading for their rookery.

The penguins are great fun – we had 110,000 of them (because we counted them) and they are very brave and they stand up for their lives: I think that people, a bit unkind to us, say that all our dogs ran wild. They only ran wild for a very short space of time, probably for about six weeks; after which unfortunately one lot went out in the ice and [were] never seen again – and they were duly tied up. But the number of penguins they actually killed was remarkable – it's not very many.

Joanna Rae: Did you find it difficult, the job of having to kill penguins and seals for the dogs and... [Crosstalk]

Eric Back: Well, I didn't do that – the Geneva Convention protects the doctors! [Laughter] The seals had to be killed for dog food and then frozen solid, and sawn up with crosscut saws. But again, the total number of seals that were killed in the course of a season to feed the dogs was really infinitesimal compared to the population.

Joanna Rae: Did you enjoy working with the dogs,

Eric Back: Oh ye-

Joanna Rae: Or were you doctor to the dogs, as it were?

Eric Back: Well the dogs didn't seem to get much doctoring – they were not very good patients. They had great characters, the dogs had, but David James was the dog expert. We were very amused, when, in Port Lockroy; we heard about dogs coming down, and they'd said that "Captain Marshall has been sent to Newfoundland to collect dogs. He is not a dog expert." So all of us immediately decided that, whether he liked it or not, by the time they come out to the Antarctic they were going to be dog experts – we certainly weren't [Laughter] But they are, I think, the original scrimshankers¹² – they work very hard, but if they could manage to avoid pulling they will do so. And they aren't dear little bow-wows, either, they are big fierce tough animals but...

Joanna Rae: They've got very strong pack instincts as well, haven't they – there's also the... hierarchy... [Crosstalk]

Eric Back: Oh yes, the nursing profession is nothing to the dogs. Everybody has their exact place in the hierarchy, and the top dog will growl at the second dog, who'll howl and lie on his back waving his arms in the air and say, "well yes, I'm a

¹² Scrimshanker. A shirker; military. *Tit-Bits*, 26 April 1890, 'Besides the dread of being considered a scrimshanker, a soldier dislikes the necessary restraints of a hospital.' (Cf. A worker in scrimshaw was known as a scrimshander.)

miserable dog” and as soon as the top dog has left, the number two goes and does the same to number three and [all] down the line. [Laughter]

One of the more unpleasant habits of the dogs is that they had a sunshine recorder the second year. We put it up at Hope Bay; but in spite of the fact that it was all supposed to be Top Secret, there it arrives duly set for 63° latitude, so obviously somebody knew where it was going to be put. This was put up on the roof of the hut but unfortunately, this was the nearest approach to a lamppost that the dogs could see for miles around, and it’s not very pleasant to try and get out a sunshine card, which has been frozen into the recorder with a lot of dog’s urine. And, finally, we constructed an anti-Rover device, with bits of upright nails skilfully placed around the sunshine recorder so the dog, if it lifts his leg, would find himself on the nails so he had to get out of range. [Laughter]

Joanna Rae: I believe you had a similar trouble with the rain gauge, as well...

Eric Back: Well the rain gauge – that was fairly alright once the dogs were tired out...

Joanna Rae: Could we perhaps talk a bit about some of the people that you sailed with; most of them sound to be very remarkable people.

Eric Back: Oh, yes, they were a most interesting class of people, of course. I mean; Marr, as I’ve said already, he got this going from nothing and I think everybody who works in the B.A.S does, in fact, owe something to Marr because I doubt whether anybody else could have done it.

But I believe it was offered to Surgeon-Commander Bingham but the Navy would not release him from his job ’cause he was a regular Naval doctor and was required for the War; that junior Naval two-striped RNVR’s were of course two a penny. So Marr worked like the proverbial Trojan and he got things going – how he did it, I don’t know.

On the other hand he did have a habit of, if there were two ways to do any job, he would choose the difficult way; he seemed to revel in doing things the hard way, which sometimes was a bit difficult if you were working with him. He was a loner, very much so, but Davies had worked with him before, and Davies was extremely loyal to him. But Marr kept his own counsel, he obviously had secret orders – presumably he knew what we were supposed to do – if he was, he was the only person who did. I’ve no doubt the instructions were, “That these are top secret and you keep them to yourself.” So that with those instructions he was to some extent like the captain of a ship – he was on his own and he couldn’t have any confidants.

But I admired Marr, I think he did very well and I found out afterwards that he was unfit because he had a duodenal ulcer and he’d had injured his back in the past, but he wouldn’t have known that during the time that he was with us. And he’d put his heart and soul into it, and as you probably are aware that, during the second year, he was supposed to put up in Hope Bay and he decided that he would not be able to carry on, and he was going to resign at the end of the season I think [after] establishing Hope Bay.

And then he was taken acutely ill and the ship was sent for and he had to go back in a hurry to Port Stanley. Certainly he worked extremely hard and nobody could have worked harder than he did.

Andrew Taylor had a very, very difficult job to follow on because, in December, Marr went up to Stanley to organise the second year – Taylor was left in charge down in Lockroy, and up until the time that Marr went sick and was sent home, Taylor knew nothing about what was going to – he knew nothing about the plans; and as he said in his article in the BAS Journal of '83, that he got no orders – whatever orders that Marr had, certainly were not passed on to Taylor, and Marr was in no fit state to pass them on to him, when he went, and he never saw Marr again...

Joanna Rae: Was Marr in a state of exhaustion at that time?

Eric Back: Yet, Marr was [in a] state of complete nervous and physical exhaustion and the *William Scoresby* was recalled to Deception after she'd sailed for her [f.g. noise] solely to take Marr back... So, as soon as he got back to Falklands, he was all right.

Joanna Rae: So, the strain had been lifted from him [Crosstalk]

Eric Back: Yes, and of course by the time we got home it was a year later and I have, to this day, no idea of what the official story of why Marr resigned, that was given, I don't know what it was, but I think the facts are that he – they're in Taylor's journal, which you've got a copy of, and I sent a confidential letter to the Admiralty in charge of the Captain of the *Scoresby* when he went home.

But he was physically and I think mentally exhausted as the result of his hard work. But Taylor did extremely well and he was known as "Quadruplicate Andy" because he said (and I notice B.A.S is still afflicted with Quadruplicate Andy; they find copies all over the place) that his doctrine was, "If you put it down in writing and in quadruplicate, nobody can lose it" and therefore, that if you've done anything, you'll get the credit for it; if you don't write it down, somebody else will get the credit for it. [Laughter]

I thought that Taylor was a very competent and able man and, as you probably know, he did a lot of work up in the Canadian Arctic before the war, he was surveying up in northern Canada; and he used to have stories about going out with his pilot called Charlie and they were flying in minus seventy below, and they had to empty all the oil out of the aeroplane when they got in, and next morning they shoved it all on the Bogie, stoked it all up and got off before it all froze.

I knew quite well about Charlie, and I, in fact, met Charlie with Andrew Taylor in 1959 in Canada because it turned out I eventually married his niece. [Laughter]

Joanna Rae: What a small world! That's incredible, isn't it [Crosstalk]

Eric Back: I think Taylor was a good surveyor; he was a good leader: I say I had been in contact with him up till quite recently but I visited him in Champlain in '59 [bu] I haven't seen him since but I have had odd letters from him.

Joanna Rae: Ivan Lamb seems to have been somewhat of an Edward Wilson of the expedition.

Eric Back: The other thing about Taylor, [Crosstalk] he was up on the DEWLINE on one occasion and he was talking to some Americans; and the Americans were saying, "Yeah, I don't know why you fellows haven't got a proper Guide Book to tell you all about this" they said, "We've got an absolutely marvellous Guide Book that tells everything we ought to do, in the Arctic." "I know," said Taylor "I wrote it." [Laughter]

Joanna Rae: Good for him!

Eric Back: Oh, Lamb was, of all the people, of our lot, Lamb was a real scientist. He's the best botanist to go down since Hooker, if not even better than him, he was a Master of his Trade, rather like Ashton was Master of his Trade; but he was a pure scientist, he encouraged the most uninterested of his companions to an interest in lichens, which most people think of as things that grow on tombstones but are now quite fashionable in this country because the air is so polluted you can't grow a decent lichen except in East Anglia. He would go around and survey some little growth about half-an-inch long, and this would be described as 'luxuriant vegetation' and he really inspired everybody with the fact that you were working with a pure scientist.

I regret to state that one of the commissions he asked me to do when I met him in 1959; he wanted me to go and see if I could find a lichen on the top of the highest mountain in Jamaica for his benefit, but I never actually got there. [Laughter] He was very interesting in that because after he went back and he put into Harvard and in Argentina [and showed] that the lichen flora that you'd find at sea-level in the Antarctic and the Arctic is the same that you'd find on the top of the Andes and the top of the Rockies. Yet he was a most interesting man and very hard working and, although he didn't look tough, he was.

Joanna Rae: Yes, in fact Davies made that comment [Crosstalk] that he was surprised that someone who'd been in a museum was so physically [Crosstalk.]

Eric Back: Oh it seems that he was a kindly man and I met him in Boston in 1959 and I heard from Taylor, just a year ago, that he was dying,

Joanna Rae: And who else were you serving with...[Crosstalk] the expedition?

Eric Back: Well 'Taff' and 'Fram'¹³ you've got already, so you don't need...

'Fram' was my particular buddy at the first year out – we ended up with the cabin one on top, you know in Lockroy, and I was very sad that he wasn't [transferred to Hope Bay] because Tommy Donnachie's machine at Port Lockroy¹⁴ had broken

¹³ Gwion Davies and 'Fram' Farrington memoirs, previously recorded.

¹⁴ Slip of the tongue. This event took place at Deception Island. (amc)

down and it was thought Farrington, who was a highly skilled senior operator should go there, whereas he could repair the equipment and the less experienced operator could in fact work in Hope Bay [where] there were other skilled people like ‘Chippy’ to repair things for him.

And in fact, at that point it worked perfectly satisfactorily. But I think ‘Fram’ of course was interesting, because he was older than many of us, and he’s thirteen years older than I am, and had spent three cruises with the *William Scoresby* and so he really did know quite a lot about what went on. We had our Falkland Islander, Johnny Blyth, who was the Handyman; the original Handyman that we had was a seaman who came out of the Pool, his name was Blair and he came down with us but Marr thought that he probably wouldn’t fit for the winter and so he arranged to have him replaced in March of ’44, and Johnny Blyth came down and was a great success.

Joanna Rae: Could you just tell me for what reason that um, Marr decided Blair wasn’t suitable?

Eric Back: No. He was quite right. [Laughter] I think that it was just that some people don’t fit. And that I think it was incredible that the rest of us did fit so well... Marr (this was his own decision) said he had decided that Blair should go home and he radioed the Falklands to send a Falkland Islander out. And I’ve already made rude remarks about people in the Falklands sending out the unfit man in ’45 but certainly the other two Falkland Islanders who were sent out were extremely fit and competent – nice people.

Joanna Rae: Did you find there was any division between...the men who were engaged in scientific work and the others?

Eric Back: No, you see, the Cook did cooking. Now, the reason for that is Tom Berry was not just a cook. I meant he was a highly skilled cook but he’d [also] been Chief Steward, as I’ve just said, in *Discovery*, he was an expert and you don’t have people who are not experts, going out doing scientific work, why should you have people who are not experts doing the cooking?

But I gather, from talking to more recent members of the B.A.S is that they had a phase in which it used to be ‘all lump in together – we must all be chaps and everybody must take their share of cooking.’ I believe they’ve now gone back to having cooks and handymen.

Certainly there was no suggestion that the handymen were in any way inferior to the others: the great criticism, which I think was justified, was that Scott was divided into officers and scientists and the men and they were completely separate.

Now that was not the case; we were officially a Naval party but Marr, of course, was an RNVR officer – I had a Naval commission, Taylor was in the Canadian Engineers and Freddy Marshall, who came out the second year, was in REME and Dr Russell was in the RE’s and David James was an RNVR officer. And the men were not. Presumably as we were officially a Naval party, we were under Naval discipline, but there certainly was no distinction between the different types of people.

Joanna Rae: Perhaps we could discuss briefly information that was passed between you and Stanley prior to moving bases – both- both at Port Lockroy and from Hope Bay?

Eric Back: Well of course, the lack of information was probably one of the worst features. To start with, it was straightforward enough – we went out in the middle of a war, and you didn't expect to hear anything and we heard about that we were going to be moved – the information the first year wasn't too bad – but the second year, the war was over in the summer of 1945 and one would have assumed that, then, one would hear a little bit more about what was going to happen. And I was looking, only this morning, [at] a letter I wrote to my mother, dated Christmas Day 1945, and that we had heard absolutely nothing about whether we were going to be relieved at all; Andrew Taylor puts in his account for the B.A.S the fact that we played a hoax on him and said that we were all going to be sent off to Peter the 1st Island!

It was really rather unkind – it wasn't funny! But [in] my letter I say “It's freeze-up in ten weeks, and we still have got no idea if we are going to be relieved, or not.” You see, as far as the *Eagle* was concerned, we knew the *Eagle* had been smashed up, so she wasn't going to come down to relieve us. And there'd been various talks about ships coming and, when we went off on our little short sledge trip in January '46, we had a code which was going to be left behind on the [indistinct word] ‘we are going to be relieved’ – ‘we are not going to be relieved’ – and one other thing was ‘we have been relieved; key under mat!’ [Laughter & Crosstalk]

Joanna Rae: You missed the boat!

Eric Back: Yes, you've missed the boat, and in fact the first thing that we knew that we were being relieved at all, was at three o'clock in the morning, Marchesi was knocking on the front door and saying don't you chaps want to be relieved?¹⁵ [Laughter]

Joanna Rae: Oh that's very unfair, really, put in terms of morale... dreadful, really. What was the sledge trip like? You had [Crosstalk] bad surfaces, didn't you?

Eric Back: Yes, there were two sledge trips run – I didn't go on them but there were two reasons; one of them was that I did the Met., the other was it was thought that as the chap at Deception was in a moribund state, that the doctor shouldn't be away, which was a pity. I went out for a week in the beginning of '46 and it would have been quite fun to have done some sledging: they went out in the wintertime and got enmeshed in very deep snow.

Joanna Rae: This was the first trip?

Eric Back: For the first trip. They had quite a hairy time, the second trip was obviously easy but read – that's well described in David James' book. I wasn't on the

¹⁵ Marchesi wasn't quite that polite. Ref: Oral History No 1.

trip so that I'm not expressing any judgements of who did what and whether they were right or wrong.

Joanna Rae: But from your own experience in the January... [Crosstalk]

Eric Back: Oh, the January trip, this...

Joanna Rae: What was that like?

Eric Back: Well of course it was, it was light all night, and one of the more interesting things was it was getting warmer all the time, so we were going on the sea ice, and the sea ice got a crust on top and about three foot of water and so we spent an awful lot of time splashing through; the object of the exercise was to take a load of stores and dump it on the mainland at a place called View Point, which was duly done. We took a whole store of paraffin and stores and that was duly dumped and we came home again.

But in '46 you see, the ice had been in for several years then: in actual fact looking back, I gather since then there's been water on several occasions, right up to the coast there – with the high temperatures and the sea ice falling on top I suppose we might well have gone and taken a trip up Antarctic Sound. [Laughter]

Joanna Rae: I think we're coming toward the end now. I must ask you, was there anything you really disliked about being down South?

Eric Back: Well you mention about the lack of news, and the fact that one was cut off, and that the world went on without you and that a lot of one's ties when one came back had gone. When one thought about disliking – well, if it was uncomfortable – it wasn't as uncomfortable as being in the London Hospital during the blitz, and I wasn't being machine-gunned like my mother was, bicycling along the road but I had survived the war that my father was killed in, so that there really wasn't much to dislike.

Joanna Rae: And what did you do afterwards – after Tabarin?

Eric Back: I went back to a medical career where I'd left off, I specialised in diseases of children and I spent eighteen years in the West Indies at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica where I was the first professor of paediatrics and after that I came home in 1972 and worked in the National Health Service until I retired last year.

I've been on the District Health Authority, I've been on various medical committees: I've been on the central committee for Hospital Medical Services; been chairman of the Regional Committee; I've been chairman of the Regional Paediatric Committee, and I've been on the BMA representative body.

So I've done a fair bit of politics; I designed a new hospital children's ward in the West Indies, I've been instrumental in getting a new hospital in Yarmouth – which is my home county and I've now more or less – how do you say – I've hung my

stethoscope up a bit, [Laughter] but it's rather amusing; the first time I came here a few years ago, the people look at you, as if you're the Old man of the Sea. [Laughter]

Joanna Rae: I think it's 'cause you're one of our founder members...

Eric Back: The other thing, I was a regular long-term RNVR – I served with them for six years and I spent the only active bit of that time [when] I went over to British Honduras on hurricane relief in 1961, that was quite interesting...

Joanna Rae: That must have been very interesting

Eric Back: We took eight doctors over to relieve in Belize: the University of the West Indies does in fact train doctors from all over the Caribbean – the English-speaking Caribbean and we put the first doctor ever to qualify from British Honduras, into the first aeroplane that went in to Belize after the hurricane...

Joanna Rae: That's a nice achievement. Is there anything else you'd like to say that we haven't covered – that you can think of?

Eric Back: Knock it off, will you?

– RECORDING ENDS –